

Why your money just keeps fading away

By Roger Boye

Today's column answers questions about U.S. paper money, an always popular "collectible."

Q—The printing on some bills I get in change has faded terribly while the paper remains firm. Why is that? My husband says it's because money seems to disappear before my eyes.

B.B., Evanston

A—Much of the front-side design tends to flake off Federal Reserve notes made about three years ago with some bad ink supplied by private industry. Your "greenbacks" might be the remnants of that printing batch, or perhaps they have been in the sun too long.

Q—Is it possible to receive two bills with similar serial numbers?

P.H., Chicago

A—On modern-day currency, you won't find the same number on two bills of an identical denomination and series year.

Q—Is there any importance to

the fact that U.S. paper money is green?

B.N., Darien

A—With just a few exceptions, green and black have been the dominant colors on all U.S. currency made since the Civil War. The use of consistent colors forces consumers to peruse a bill's design—and not its color—to determine the denomination. That "extra look" helps to hold down the number of bogus bills passed into circulation, or so the theory goes.

Q—On some paper money a star appears after the serial number, rather than a letter. What does it mean? Are such bills collectible?

B.L., Round Lake

A—The government produces consecutively numbered "star notes" to replace bills spoiled during the printing process and destroyed. Paper money that is collectible for its age, series year or other factors would be worth even more if there's a star in the serial number. But "common

bills" have no special value, with or without a star.

Q—I found a \$5 silver certificate, series 1899, inside an old book I bought at a flea market. It is much larger than today's money. Why the special size? Is my find valuable?

C.R., Oak Park

A—Before 1929, U.S. paper money was 1¼ inches longer and ½ inch wider than today's currency, giving it an additional seven square inches in surface area. The size was reduced to save printing costs and to make money easier to use. The bill you describe might retail for at least \$50 if it's in "fine" or better condition.

Q—Is a \$1 bill printed off-center worth special money?

P.W., Chicago

A—Probably not, unless the design shift—either up or down, or left or right—is so great that the edge of an adjoining bill can be seen along one side of your Federal Reserve note. (Paper money is printed 32 bills to a